

Paper name: Environmental Geography and Disaster Management

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Topic: Disaster: Meaning and Definition

Etymology

The term 'disaster' owes its origin to the French word '*desastre*' which is the combination of the article - '*des*' and '*astre*' meaning 'star'. In earlier days, a disaster was considered to occur due to some unfavorable star. Nowadays, the term 'disaster' is commonly used to denote any odd event, be natural or man-made, which brings about immense misery to a region. So that it becomes difficult to cope with the situation through local resources.

Meaning and Definition

A disaster is the result of an immediate situation or the result of a long set process which disrupts normal human life in its established social, traditional and economic system. This is due to the destruction of environment which is caused by extraordinary natural destructive phenomena or human-induced hazards resulting in human hardship and suffering beyond recovery unless external aid is brought in.

Disaster, whether natural or anthropogenic, are sudden adverse unfortunate extreme events or hazards which cause great damage to human beings as well as plants and animals.

Disasters occur rapidly, instantaneously, and indiscriminately.

It is obvious from the above definitions that these are the results of responses of environmental hazards. **Thus, all the extreme events are hazards but not all the hazards are disasters. A hazard may become disaster only when it strikes the inhabited area causing damages to human life and property.**

A formal definition of disaster may be "an event, concentrated in time and space, which threaten a society or a relatively self- sufficient sub-division of a society with major unwanted consequences as a result. It of the collapse of precautions which had hitherto been culturally accepted as adequate" (Turner, 1997).

Disaster is **assessed** on the basis of the following features:

- 1) Disruption to normal pattern of life. Such disruption is usually severe and may also be sudden, unexpected and widespread.

- 2) Human effects such as loss of life, livelihood and property, injury, hardship and adverse effects on health.
- 3) Effects on Social Structure such as destruction of or damage to infrastructure, buildings, communications and other essential services.
- 4) Community needs such as shelter, food, clothing, medical assistance and social care.

The severity of a disaster situation is usually reckoned in terms of loss of life or property or both.
